

Calgary

Thousands protest vaccine mandates in Calgary, as hospitals struggle with rising COVID cases

Nearly 700 hospital beds in Alberta are filled with COVID-19 patients

[Sarah Rieger](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 12, 2021 6:12 PM MT | Last Updated: September 13, 2021



Protesters in Calgary held signs comparing the plight of Jewish victims of the Holocaust to workers who are being asked by their employers to get vaccinated for COVID-19 (and who can access medical or religious exemptions). (Anis Heydari/CBC)

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Roughly 2,000 people rallied in Calgary on Sunday to protest vaccine mandates and other public health measures.

There are more than 16,000 active cases of COVID-19 in Alberta, more than 4,400 of which are in Calgary.

The rally — purportedly held to support firefighters, emergency medical services, police, nurses, city and health-care workers who are against vaccine mandates — began at Olympic Plaza before marchers walked arm-in-arm through downtown.

[Alberta Health Services](#) and the City of Calgary are requiring employees to receive two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine. They say those who can't be vaccinated for a medical reason or for other protected grounds under the province's human rights act will be accommodated.

- ['Boiling point': Alberta doctors warn of health system collapse as COVID cases climb](#)
- [Calgary hospitals cancel all elective surgeries as COVID-19 cases fill hospitals](#)

Organizers had asked attendees to wear black or blue shirts in solidarity with those front-line workers. None of the protesters CBC spoke to were currently working as first responders and would be subject to the vaccine policy.

Blake Willard, who retired from the Calgary Fire Department (CFD) 13 years ago, was at the protest in a CFD shirt and a "Make Alberta Great Again" hat.

Willard said he's not against all vaccines, just the COVID-19 vaccine, adding he planned to get vaccinated for travel later this year.

"Well, guess what, we're getting used to this COVID," he said. "Show me the dead people. There's a very good chance those old and those compromised would pass away anyway."





Protesters met at Olympic Plaza, where some speakers shared misinformation about COVID-19 case counts and the accuracy of PCR tests, before marching through downtown. (Brooks DeCillia/CBC)

Nearly 700 hospital beds in the province are filled with COVID-19 patients; the virus has killed more than 2,400 people in Alberta. One of those who [died this week](#) in Alberta was a young, unvaccinated pregnant woman.

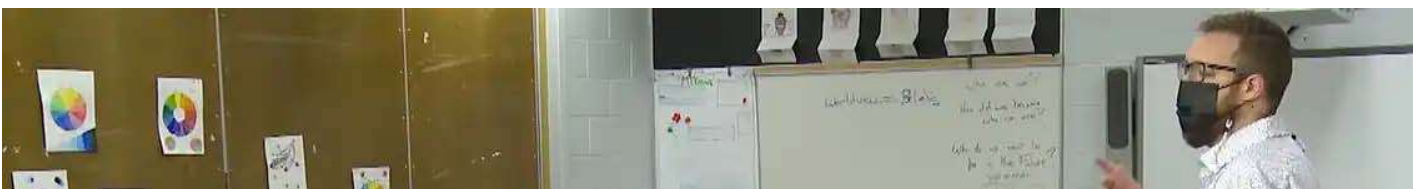
Intensive care beds were at 130 per cent of capacity this week and surgeries have been cancelled in order to redirect health-care staff.

- [**Calgary fire chief says most of department 'ashamed' that some firefighters attended vaccine protest**](#)

Multiple people in the crowd carried signs or wore shirts expressing support for the People's Party of Canada, and others wore shirts stating they were unvaccinated.

One man carried a flag reading "molon labe" — an apocryphal ancient Greek quote from King Leonidas of Sparta that translates to "come and take them" — which has been used as a rallying cry for neo-fascist groups in the U.S. and Europe.

WATCH / Alberta schools see COVID-19 cases rise:





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As Alberta's hospitals buckle under the pressure of a COVID-19 surge, some schools say 10 per cent of students are out sick and there's no sign the province is increasing restrictions or moving to vaccine passports.

Some of the speakers espoused misinformation about COVID-19 case counts and claimed vaccinated people spread the virus more easily than the unvaccinated.

Lynn Freemantle, who observed the protest from across the street, said she feels a responsibility to wear a mask and be vaccinated, so if she is carrying the coronavirus she doesn't spread it to others. "It's called loving your neighbour," she said.

Freemantle said she was angry to see the crowd of protesters.

"I say to those people, 'what are you going to do when you get sick and there's no health care out there for you because of what you have done,'" she said.

Just 60.3 per cent of Alberta's total population is fully vaccinated (70.9 per cent of those eligible). It's the lowest percentage of the eligible population to be vaccinated [across the country](#).





Banff-Airdrie independent candidate Derek Sloan, who was ousted from the federal Conservative caucus after accepting a donation from a known white nationalist, was among those in attendance at the rally against vaccine mandates. (Anis Heydari/CBC)

The Jewish Federation of Edmonton [expressed disgust](#) at photos that showed some protesters equating vaccine mandates with the genocide committed by Nazi Germany.

"Let us be clear, in no uncertain terms: there is no equivalence. We are disgusted by this behaviour. There is no need to delegitimize the victims and horrors of the Holocaust," the federation said in a post to social media.

Other rallies were also held in Lethbridge and Edmonton. The group was planning to hold more protests outside hospitals in major Canadian cities, including Calgary, on Monday.

Medical groups have decried anti-vaccine protests [outside of hospitals](#), out of concerns it will impact access to care and demoralize already exhausted health-care workers.

With files from Anis Heydari and Brooks DeCillia

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